

Berrong on Loti, ed. Quella-Villéger and Vercier (2015)

Loti, Pierre. *Pêcheur d'Islande*. Ed. Alain Quella-Villéger and Bruno Vercier. Paris: Bleu autour, 2015. Pp. 310. ISBN: 978-2-35848-068-0

Richard M. Berrong, Kent State University

Since there are already several editions of Pierre Loti's masterpiece in print, including Jacques Dupont's for the Folio Classique series, one might ask what this more expensive paperback has to offer to justify its addition to the pack. The answer lies in its inclusion of photographs taken in the early 1890s by Edmond Rudaux in preparation for his well-known illustrations.

Loti's publisher Calmann-Lévy commissioned Rudaux to prepare 125 drawings for a luxurious gift edition of *Pêcheur d'Islande* that appeared in 1893, seven years after the novel's first publication. They also paid for him to spend time in Paimpol so that, unlike most subsequent illustrations, his would have a connection to reality. On location Rudaux took photographs, [seventeen of which are reproduced here](#). They provide fascinating documentation of Paimpol and of life in a small harbor town in late nineteenth-century Brittany. It is a shame, however, that there is no commentary pointing out the differences between what they depict and the Paimpol Loti knew and had in mind when he wrote the novel. For example, there is no mention that, between the times Loti visited the area and Rudaux photographed it, the first harbor basin with locks was built, transforming Paimpol from a *port d'échouage*, where the Icelandic schooners lay beached at low tide along the shore, into its current state, in which boats in port remain impressively afloat even at low tide. That radically transforms how a reader will visualize two important scenes set at the harbor in part one, chapter two and part five, chapter two.

This is not an insignificant issue. In many ways *Pêcheur d'Islande* is intentionally anti-Realist/Naturalist, specifically as a social response to and critique of Zola's *Germinal*. Still, Loti was intent, like Zola, on having his readers picture the scenes in his story. He repeatedly describes them as "tableaux." To this end, he could assume on the part of his readers a visual knowledge of the world that he was describing because a fair number of them had visited it: the Breton coast had been opened to seaside resort tourism by the rapidly expanding French railway system, a fact to which Loti alludes by mentioning that the female protagonist, Gaud Mével, visited Paimpol for years only in the summer, "comme les baigneuses" (I: 3). Indeed, part of the novel's enormous original success was due to its apparent promise to offer these *bourgeois*—and *bourgeoises*—a glimpse into the lives of those whom they encountered only as the strange-speaking, strangely dressed inhabitants of the towns behind the beach-front resorts, as Dominique Rouillard showed in *Le Site balnéaire*. A great admirer of Flaubert, who played on his own urban readers' safely assumed familiarity with Normandy, Loti did something similar in *Pêcheur d'Islande*: he built on assumed visual knowledge when writing about small-town Breton life, something that Rudaux's photographs can help us recapture—though Loti relied on his readers' visual ignorance of North Atlantic cod fishing to depict in very evocatively Impressionist tones a life there that, *pace* some of the critiques quoted in this edition, is anything but evidence of a "souci de réalisme."

The other justifications for this edition are some of the essays that comprise the last third of the volume. The best of them situate the novel in an ongoing quarrel that involved Maupassant, Mirbeau, Le Goffic, and other contemporary writers about the real nature of the Bretons and, more generally, the rural poor. The reigning Naturalist ideology, combined with various social and linguistic prejudices, could not brook these people being depicted as anything other than beasts. (Think of Zola's *La Terre* [1887].) Loti had toyed with that ideology in his previous novel, *Mon Frère Yves* (1883), but decided subsequently to pursue a different path. (The French Academy chose to honor this alternate path at least in part as a condemnation of Zola and Co. in 1891 by electing Loti over Zola during one of the latter's futile attempts to gain that so greatly coveted recognition.)

There is mention of minor poets who wrote now-forgotten verse about the characters in *Pêcheur d'Islande*, but the novel would have been better served by an essay situating it in its major literary lineage, since it builds intertextually on *Germinal* and *Eugénie Grandet*, not to mention *Mon Frère Yves*, only to be intertextualized in turn in one of early twentieth-century French literature's greatest publishing successes, Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*. I also wish there had been more annotation of the text itself, but I realize that too much of that can scare off the not-to-be-forgotten general reader whose purchases are needed to keep unsubsidized private publishers like Bleu autour afloat.

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